

It Suits You (The Jacket Fic) by pwuthyboi

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Billy Hargrove Needs a Hug, Billy is Alive, First Kiss, Getting Together, Harringrove, M/M, Mutual Pining, Not Actually Unrequited Love, Pining, Post-Battle of Starcourt (Stranger Things), The Jacket fic, The Upside Down comes back so there is demodog fighting, and Steve does get hurt but its for plot, and Steve's jacket looks awfully like Billy's jacket, and billy comes back heh, okay so the bts photos came out, so here is a super self indulgent fic about Steve inheriting Billy's jacket.

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

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Summary:

Billy curls his head forward, looking past Robin at Steve. Stares at him with a pinched brow before it smooths into a smile.

“Is this my jacket?”

Oh shit.

“Uhh--”

Billy laughs, soft and simple. “Suits you, Pretty Boy.”

It Suits You (The Jacket Fic)

Author's Note:

alright so that s4 bts photo of joe in a leather jacket looks an AWFUL lot like Billy's jacket from s2 sooo.....I wrote a super self indulgent fic where Steve inherits Billy's jacket after Starcourt (and that Billy is actually alive, duh.) Enjoy these boy being stupid and fighting demodogs.

Steve doesn't mean to claim it. It's actually Max's, or it was.

It was one of the things she was able to sneak out, to claim from Billy's room before Neil tossed it all. Threw it all through the window to the boys who then passed it to Steve's car, a whole assembly line illuminated by the early morning moonlight. It's the last thing she takes. She grabs his leather jacket from the front coat rack-- Neil claimed it was his even though Billy bought it fair and square-- and throws it on her shoulders, on top of his jean jacket, and sprints to Steve's idling car.

He took them all out for milkshakes afterwards. A thank you for helping Maxine, even though he knows they would all do it in a heartbeat. Still, it feels like things are returning slightly back to normal, back to the semi-normal life he had before Starcourt. Maxine smiles wide, the boys argue, Dustin talks his ear off, and the knot in his chest unfurls.

He doesn't mean to use it. It's cold and he needs a smoke and it's the first thing he grabs. Once his fingers stop shaking and the first bit of nicotine enters his blood stream and his brain cools, he realizes what the fuck he's wearing.

His hands tremble and for once, it's not the nightmares that cause it. It feels sure under his fingertips when he grabs the collar and lifts it. Sure enough, it still smells like the asshole who used to wear it. Reeks something awful of bravado and too much of that thick cologne. But Steve presses his nose into it. Breaths deep. Doesn't realize he's sat down into one of the pool loungers until the cigarette he forgot about

burns his second knuckle.

He drops it with a curse. Hears it sizzle out against the cold stone. He looks up, propelled by god knows what, and sees Max through the window, watching him. He can't read her face, as usual, but he knows there is no malice. She should be upset at him, he thinks. He took her jacket, the one that belonged to her brother, but yet Steve is the one taking it in and letting the scent of it settle in his lungs like it's cigarette smoke.

It's pathetic really.

Steve wants to apologize, wants to create some sort of excuse, but then Max walks away. Steve's hands are cold, but the rest of him is warm. Too warm, almost. Makes him understand how Hargrove could manage to wear his chest open like that, that perhaps the peacocking was also a bit beneficial.

When Steve enters, he doesn't take off the jacket. Doesn't even think to. Doesn't want to. He wears it for a good while before he feels the prickle of sweat under his skin and strips it so fast. He doesn't want it to reek like sweat, knows that he smells like he hasn't showered in three days. He probably hasn't. He wants it to smell of the pure leather, the smoke that has imbedded itself in the cotton collars, wants it to smell of him.

He drapes it over the armrest of the sofa. Plain sight. A polite gesture for Max, one that screams "take this, I cannot bear to have it any longer".

Max won't stop looking at him. Staring really. Steve doesn't like how it makes his face hot, like when his father yelled at him when he was younger for going through his mother's makeup. So, Steve closes his eyes. A childish thing really. If I cannot see you, you cannot see me. The kids are rambling on about their game, things that Steve can't keep up with. It's nice though, to have the house so full. So loud.

Steve doesn't mean to fall asleep.

He wakes and the clock blinks a red 3:41am. The kids are nowhere to be seen and the television is still on, volume low. He knows that

they're all dispersed among the many guest rooms of the Harrington house, but Steve still has to check. Grabs his bat-- because old habits die hard-- and peeks into each room. Will and Lucas are in one room, Dustin asleep at the foot of their bed. Mike snores in a room alone. The disturbed sheets next to him makes him laugh. Dustin isn't a heavy sleeper. Probably pulled the short straw to sleep next to Mike.

El and Max are sound asleep as well, curled into each other like they fell asleep in the middle of sharing secrets. Knowing them, they probably were. They always seem to cherish the moments that they have away from the boys, where they can pretend they're regular teens that don't know about the horrors of the world.

Steve returns downstairs. He keeps vowing to Robin that he'll graduate back to his bedroom at some point, but tonight is not the night. His mind runs in circles and he keeps the bat by his foot. He watches reruns until the birds chirp and his eyes grow too heavy.

The kids are all gone when he wakes late in the afternoon. It's the longest he's slept in a long time. He can feel how bad his cowlicks are without seeing them and his face feels numb from where it was smushed into Billy's jacket all night.

Oh shit.

He puts the jacket into his car after that, lays it all nice and proper in the trunk. Won't let it crease. Tells himself he needs to get wax so it won't crack. Saves it for when he picks Max up yet.

On Monday, she's striding towards his car and pops into the passenger seat. She's wearing a jean jacket today, one that is painfully familiar and takes less than a breath to identify. She looks at him for a moment and then asks "are you gonna drive or did you forget how?"

He shakes his head, ruffles her hair, and she never asks about the coat.

He buys the wax two days later. Sits out on the back patio in the sun and rubs the jacket until it shines. The leather smell is stronger now, but he can still smell the cologne in it. He doesn't mean to smell it

again, isn't looking for the scent of his old high school rival, but the sun started to set and the shivers set in. It's a perfectly good jacket. Hargrove wouldn't have wanted it to go to waste.

He laughs at the idea of Billy seeing him now. Remembers his whole "Am I dreaming, or is that you Harrington" line from night of the tunnels. How he had shed the coat with a finesse that you only see in movies, throwing it on top of his Camaro. Makes him wonder if he'd laugh, tell him to fuck off like he always did with Tommy. A bit of bite under his laugh. Wonders if his face would sour, if he'd clench his jaw like he did that one night, set his jaw and speak low, low enough to rumble. How he spoke like it was a secret, smoke billowing out between his lips and his tongue. And that's the thing that always put Steve on edge. That taunt thing that Billy always did. Wagging his tongue at Steve like he knew a secret that Steve didn't, that he was waiting to see if Steve barked, if he'd bite.

Steve hated Billy's guts for only a week, until his bruises started to yellow and he could sleep without waking up every hour when he shifted on his pillow. Then, he just. Felt sad for him. Saw how different he was after that night, how he never met Steve's eye after that. It pained him. He's seen a lot of people lose their spark over the years, how smiles mellow out and crow's feet are replaced with frown lines.

Saw it with his parents.

Saw it in his own reflection.

Should have noticed when it happened to Billy. Should have seen how the boy who burned so bright had turned so cold.

Steve pulls the jacket closer around him. Contemplates smoking another cigarette, but decides against it. Takes himself and the jacket up to his bedroom, still shivering from the cold that seeped into his skin while he was out there. Lamenting. Doing the shit his shrink told him not to do.

Whatever.

He's only got a slight shiver to him when sleep takes him. The

warmth of the jacket, the softness of the mattress. It takes him quick. Lets him dream of a world where there were no tunnels, no beasts with petalling faces, no night at the Byers. A world where he doesn't have to sleep with a studded bat by his feet. A world where Steve noticed when the spark dulled.

He doesn't mean to make it a regular thing, falling asleep in the jacket. But it's the best sleep he's had in a long time, probably since the night Nancy pointed a gun in his face and he learned what fear smells like and death looks like. He tries not to feel guilty for it. Doesn't know why he does. He rationalizes with himself, thinks that it's like how he always slept better with Nancy in his arms. How the smell of her flowery shampoo and her soft even breaths were the best lullaby.

Maybe he just wants to have someone else there, to have his mind supply him with another body besides him. So the house doesn't seem so empty. So he doesn't have to hold the bat so hard that his knuckles turn white whenever he gets a glass of water. So he doesn't have to be alone in it all. Nancy has Jonathan, Joyce has Hopper, and the kids have each other. He'll always be the odd one out. Maybe, it's not a bad thing to let himself enjoy it, just for a moment.

What harm is a little bit of comfort?

He doesn't think about how nice it would be, to have such a firestarter like Hargrove in his home. How he'd drop his boots right by the front door, right where his mother hates. How he'd blare music like he does in his Camaro, all loud and metallic. Something you can't ignore. Doesn't think about how his loud laugh-- the one that you could hear clear across the bustling cafeteria-- would fill the house and settle well into Steve's bones.

Nancy never left a mark when she was over. He found a bobby pin of hers once, a couple strands of hair between his sheets. Other than that, it was nothing. She'd come and she'd go just as easily. Kept herself small. Palpable.

Steve guesses he did the same. Cut himself into bite sized pieces thinking that it would be easier for Nancy to stomach, until he was too small. Wasn't big enough for Nancy to care about, to notice. She

had bigger things to deal with. They both did. She was forever moving on, trying to be three steps ahead and that didn't leave time for morning embraces, for basking in each other's company, for waiting around for a highschool burnout like Steve to catch up.

Steve hangs the jacket downstairs on the coat rack when the kids come. He tries to have them come a lot, likes to keep the place as full as he can have it. Their parents don't mind. Steve offers to drive them everywhere, offering his place as a crash pad for all the little dweebs. It's a symbiotic relationship.

One night, when Steve is making three boxes of mac and cheese to go around for the kids, Max wanders in. Perches herself up on the counter right next to Steve. Sips at her soda and just watches.

“What's up, Madmax?”

She shrugs. She does this sometimes, since Starcourt. He thinks that she gets overwhelmed, that she retreats into her head and just lets the world go past. He does the same thing. Maybe he's just projecting. But they always end up sitting on the couch together, just watching and listening. Content to just experience it all instead of partake. Steve doesn't like thinking about it a lot. Doesn't like to think about all the things that had to happen to make her act the same as a fucked up teen that's almost half her senior.

“I forgot to return the jacket to you,” he says. Doesn't know why he does. “It's on the coat rack.”

“I know,” she says.

He continues stirring the noodles. Stares at the bubbling pot like it will give him a cue card.

“Alright,” he says slowly, “Whenever you need it back, it's right there.” He pauses, backtracking. “Or want it. Whenever you want it. It's yours.”

“It's not,” she sighs, “No matter how much I wear it, or his jean one, or his stupid band shirts, they're still his. They won't ever be mine.”

“That's not what I meant, Max.”

“I know,” she kicks her feet against the cabinet. Her feet reach about the same spot that his did when he was her age. Watches as her heels almost meet the mark that he left all those years ago. She’s growing like a sprout, giving Mike a run for his money. “It’s too big for me anyways. And heavy. ‘S alright.”

Steve hums and takes the pot over to the sink to strain it. Closes his eyes as the steam hits his face. Thinks over what to say, if he should say anything at all.

“Call in El and the boys,” he decides.

Steve feels a bit better after that. Starts wearing the jacket when he’s out. The transition of summer to fall is quick in Hawkins, but the winter comes even faster. It’s odd when he first wears it to the supermarket. He’s half expecting some random person to say to him, “Hey isn’t that Billy Hargrove’s jacket?” or “Why do you have a dead boy’s coat? You two weren’t even close”. And that’s the bitch of it all, Steve supposes. He’s stuck wondering about what ifs that he can’t even fix. Can’t hope for a discussion at the class reunion where they laugh it off, cheer their beers or something, and decide to keep in touch. That old rivalries are stupid. That they could try it again, with all of the years behind them.

Someone does mention the jacket, though.

It’s the cashier. A scrawny dude with black liner smudged under his eyes. “I dig the jacket. ‘S cool.”

“Thanks,” Steve replies.

“It was a gift,” he says.

“From a friend,” he adds. Because he’s dumb. And he can’t stop talking.

“Sweet gift,” the kid says with a nod, like he approves. “Good friend.”

“Yeah,” Steve breathes, “He was.”

Winter is a bitch in Hawkins. It’s a wet cold, the type that seeps under your skin and pools in between your bones. The streets are the

worst. With all of the ice and the slush from past snows, the roads aren't a safe cruise anymore. Your brain flickers between dwelling on the cold, despite your car's heater pitifully trying to warm the cabin and watching the road with hawklike precision, hoping you catch the black ice before your tires do.

Steve's just glad that he's no longer scooping ice cream on top of it all. It's the only good thing that came out of Starcourt. With no job and his "big bambi eyes" (as Robin likes to call it) batting his lashes and pulling the pity card, he was able to score a job at Family Video. Robin says that it was all her doing, but he likes to give himself a little credit. It's not the best thing in the world. Keith and his cheeto breath watch everything that he does like he's just waiting for Steve to mess up and Steve's about to punch the one tv that plays the same trailer again and again, but he has Robin. And it's income. Another mark on his resume.

He ends up wearing the jacket everywhere. It's not intentional. One day, he wakes up and the temperature has plummeted. It's too cold to just wear his Member's Club windbreaker and he doesn't have time to dig out his winter coat-- the hideous neon thing his mother swears is "in style". Billy's jacket is just hanging there. So he grabs it. Slips into it with practiced ease. He tells himself that it's just for the day, that when he gets home he'll venture into the basement and pry the box of coats out from all of the Christmas decor.

He never does.

Steve hates his pool the most, for obvious reasons. The basement is second on his list. He doesn't like the dark cold of it. Doesn't like all of the shadows, how it reminds him of the tunnels. He could just do it during the day, or have one of the kids go with him. But that's pathetic.

The leather is comfortable and familiar. So, he rationalizes that it's easier that way. That's all.

Robin comments on it once, her eyes all squinty, like Steve is see through.

"Nice coat," she tells him. He knows it's loaded. "Don't recall it.

When'd you get it?"

"It's a gift." It's an easy lie, one that he's said so many times he might start to believe it.

"I see," she says, still squinting at him. It makes him sweaty under his collar. Makes him shrug off the coat before he wants to. Makes him leave the comfort of it. "Got tired of looking like mall carpets?"

"Something like that."

She has a way of telling him that she's caught him without her saying anything. She just stays quiet, gives him the look that she's making right now, and usually sticks to curt and often cryptic comments. It's the same shit she pulled with him when she caught onto how he always got caught up by *The Outsiders* when it played on the television. How he managed a decent, flirtatious conversation with women, but fumbled horribly, stuttering and flushing red when a decent looking boy would even smile his way. How he asked too many questions about "how did you know?"

So what if he thought men were cute. It was normal to like both. It happens. Bisexual. Robin taught him that.

"It's a different look on you, Romeo." She's putting away tapes, speaking with a tone that makes Steve wary. Makes him watch her. Makes want to curse under his breath when she looks up and stares straight into his eyes. "Very...Soda Pop Curtis of you."

"Goddammit, Robin."

She's smart. Too goddamn smart. He shouldn't be surprised that he can't hide anything from the girl who cracked a Super Secret Russian Code in twenty four hours while not even knowing the language. She laughs, throwing her head back. Laughs so hard her nose scrunches and she snorts.

"Alright, Miss Piggy. Laugh it up."

And she does.

The new year flies by and Steve dreads the day that the weather warms up. He wraps the coat around him as the whole crew of them run outside and scream to the sky “Happy New Year!”

It's 1986 and the worst year of his life is over. Just like that. He opens the new year buzzed on cheap wine that he's been sharing with Robin, Nancy, and Jonathan. Opens the new year with a sigh of relief that it's restarting. Opens the new year breathing in the frozen air and leather.

He doesn't make a resolution. Just a wish. Hopes that the year will be better than the previous. That good things will happen to them.

It doesn't last long.

The snow is just starting to fully melt, showing signs of an incoming spring, when it happens. There's a tree at the edge of town that isn't coming out of hibernation. Rather, it looks like it's dying. Sickly. Hop hears about it when the farmer calls him to close the street behind his land so they could take it down safely. Within an hour of seeing the tree, the whole crew has learned about it and they all have to see it. Steve drives the majority of the kids. Mike rides with El in Hopper's truck.

Sure enough, it's what they feared.

It was rotting from the inside, black sap leaking from the bursting bark. It reeked of something awful, but Steve knew the smell. Remembered it every night when he tried to sleep, when he felt phantom vines tugging at his legs and inhumane chittering rang in his ears.

“Fuck,” he found himself saying.

“Shit,” Dustin agreed.

Max slammed the car door with such force that the car shook. Steve left the kids with Robin once she arrived with Nancy and Jonathan. He let her gawk at the sight, finally able to see what fueled Steve's nightmares. The origin of it all.

Steve found Max behind a tree, far enough away that you could no

longer smell it. He stepped heavy, letting the twigs and leaves below him alert her of his presence, but she stayed. She was curled into herself and he didn't need to see her face to know she was crying. Read it in the twitch of her shoulders and her shuddering breaths.

"I can't do this again," she told him, not bothering to turn around.

He doesn't know what to say so he steps forward, slowly wrapping his arms around her. Gives her space to push back if needed. Allows her to cling if she needs to. And she does. She burrows his head into his chest and hugs so tight it labors his breath.

It takes almost two weeks of monitoring to deem it stable enough to explore. El can't tell if the entrance is new, or if it was just mislooked when they did the sweep after Starcourt. It's weak, she says, but still an entrance. Still a liability. Still a possibility.

Max doesn't go. She stays back with Lucas and Will at the Byers. Joyce stays with them. Steve doesn't blame her. After almost losing Will and Hopper, he knows that she needs the distance and the company as much as the others.

The sight of Nancy with a shotgun both terrifies and humors Steve. She's so small, but she has always packed a punch; He's not worried about it. He's more concerned that he's not even phased by it anymore.

She gives Robin another one, having spent the previous couple days with her shooting cans up by Hopper's cabin to get some practice after she refused to stay behind. Dustin stays up top, manning the walkie. Mike joins him when El demands, stating that he won't be any help to them down in the tunnels. Steve, Robin, and Nancy all have to hide their smirks when he obeys, head down like a hurt puppy.

Steve swings his bat in the air, lets it whip through the air. Eases up his shoulder. Gets ready to batter up.

It's just as horrible as he remembered. Even with Robin's perfume sprayed onto the inside of the bandana covering his lower face, it still fills his throat. Thick and choking. He zips up the jacket-- Billy's

jacket-- and breathes in the leather. Tries to let it calm the heartbeat he hears in his ears.

They split up. It's not ideal, but the tunnels are a maze. Hopper, El, and Jonathan go to the left. Nancy, Robin, and Steve go to the right. Despite the rules of chivalry, Steve demands that he goes first, and for once, Nancy agrees. He holds the bat at the ready. The clip-on camping flashlight that Dustin had fastened to the strap of his backpack lights his way.

The tunnels aren't as alive as they were last year. There was a thrumming to it back then, like it had a pulse. Now, it was dead quiet. Steve didn't know which he preferred. At least back then, he knew that there would be monsters. Now, he can't tell if he's bait or not.

Robin trips over an old root. Or vine. Goes down with a tumble and a loud "fuck". There's a tear at her knee and Steve can see it now. The blood. Nancy gets to her first, looks up to Steve with fear in her eyes when she sees it too.

If Steve wasn't panicking before, he definitely is now. He knows how these beasts are. How sharklike they are, teeth and all. Steve rips the bottom of his shirt without a thought and passes it to Nancy. She wraps it up quickly and helps Robin to her feet. Robin winces when she puts weight on it and Steve knows they're fucked. Looks around them and sees how they're in a crossroads, a section of converging tunnels. A fork in the path.

They have to go now.

He looks at the cut and thinks of El in Starcourt. Hopes to god that something doesn't pop out of it like with El's leg.

"We can't stay here," Nancy tells him. Robin's breathing fast. One part pain, two parts panic.

Nancy grabs the walkie and calls up to Dustin and the others as Steve takes up Robin's right side, throwing her arm around his shoulders. Keeps his bat in one of his hands.

“We’re coming back. Robin tripped and she’s bleeding.”

“C’mon, Piggy,” Steve says. Tries to reassure. Tries to calm her down. “I’ve got you.”

Nancy walks behind them, gun at the ready, checking behind them as he helps her limp along. They try to leave as fast as they can, trying to remember which way they came.

They walk and walk, taking turn after turn. Steve didn’t remember that many turns on the way in.

“Shit,” Nancy cries out, her hands in her hair as she looks around. They’ve made it to another intersection. They come from all directions. They could be surrounded, swarmed. He doesn’t remember which one they came from.

Robin is almost fully leaning into him. He walks her to the wall and props her up. Takes off the bandage to assess. Her cut looks nasty and he can tell she’s fading faster than he had hoped for.

“Fuck,” he breathes and Robin whines. It makes her sound too young. It pains him.

“Steve?” Nancy whispers.

He doesn’t answer, busy redressing the cut. Pulling off his backpack to find the first aid kit that he had brought.

“Steve. Listen.”

And Steve stills. He hears it then. The chittering.

“No, no, no,” Steve says. Pleads. Turns to Robin and works faster as the noises get louder.

“Steve,” Nancy sobs. He can hear the tears in her eyes. He can hear them, many of them.

“I don’t wanna die,” Robin cries and Steve’s heart clenches.

He grabs Robin’s shotgun, slipping it from her shoulders and putting

it in her grasp.

“Try not to shoot one of us.” He tries for a joke, but there’s no humor in it. He puts a hand to her cheek and tries to smile. Reassurance for both of them. A goodbye or something. Just in case.

Steve grabs his bat and stands next to Nancy. He looks at her, sees her nod at him with an expression he doesn’t want to identify. Sees the tears that fall down her cheeks.

They can hear the crackle of the walkie talkie. Nancy lets out a sob as Jonanthan’s voice filters through the static.

“If I don’t survive, tell him I love him,” she says, then turns to Steve. “I love you too.”

“I love you too, Nance.”

It makes his heart stop, not in the way it did months ago, but because this is it. They’re saying their goodbyes. They’re ready to go out swinging. So Steve widens his stance, remembers the posture he learned from baseball years ago, and hears a voice remind him to plant your goddamn feet, Harrington.

He can hear the echoes of their feet. They’re running. Ready to bite. Steve adjusts his grip on his bat. Shifts his weight. Cracks his neck. Lets out a low breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“Come on you slimy bastards.”

He takes a breath.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

And he starts swinging.

He hits the first one with a satisfying crunch, right at where its eye socket should be. Shoves his heel into the beast to yank his bat out of the mess. Nancy fires two shots and he covers her while she reloads. Takes another down in two hits. One to the left and then the second in a down swing. Finds himself laughing out loud, cackling like he enjoys the adrenaline coursing through his veins and the black blood splattering against his skin.

“Steve, behind!” Robin shouts and Nancy shoots at the one that was lunging at him. He takes it down with four more swings. There may have been overkill, but he’d rather be safe than sorry. Double taps them all. Robin’s standing at this point. Back to back with Nancy, shooting while she loads.

Steve’s bat is over his head, preparing for a down swing when one barrels into his side. It knocks the air out of him when he lands and he skids a couple feet across the wet floor. His bat goes flying, far out of reach.

The girls cry out for him, but he can’t hear them. The beast roars in his face and Steve is face to face with the rows of teeth that he’s been seeing in his dreams for the past two years. He throws up his arm just in time and screams as they sink into his forearm, just barely making it through the leather to pierce into his flesh. He thrashes against the thing, but it’s big and shock is slowing his movements.

The dog rips its teeth out of Steve’s arm, taking leather with it and dragging gashes across his skin. Steve feels his throat burn with how loud he howls. He clutches his arm to his chest, barely has time to react before the thing bites down on his shoulder. He feels the warmth of his own blood against his neck, can see the rich red of it in his periphery.

He closes his eyes.

He can hear Robin and Nancy, how they shout for him.

Hears the shots of their guns.

Hears Nancy curse when she drops the shells.

After a stuttered cry, his eyes fly open and he thrashes again, using his free elbow to bash it into the side of the creature. Tries to kick it's underbelly, but even jostling the thing won't ease it up from his shoulder.

He looks up with a cry, can't bear to look at the damage. Watches as a figure looms above him, rushes in with sure steps. Wonders if Hopper and then heard their call. Wonders if they made a call at all. Watches as their shoulders rotate, getting ready for a swing. Steve braces himself for impact. Hears the sickening sound of splitting flesh. Gasps and flails when the teeth release and the dead weight of the dog's body falls onto him. The figure kicks the corpse off of him. Kneels down and enters Steve's line of sight.

"Well hi there, Pretty Boy."

Steve's breath leaves him as Billy Hargrove stares down at him, his signature smirk spreading across his lips. He had spent two years wanting to punch that stupid grin off his face, but right now, it's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

"What the fuck?" It's not a thank you, but Billy takes it, tongue running against the fronts of his teeth like Steve's back in gym class instead of bleeding out in the tunnels of death.

Billy hauls him up by his good shoulder and if Steve thought Billy was ripped before, he was absolutely wrong. Billy passes Steve his bat with a wink and turns to swing-- a perfect arc of strength and power-- sending his axe careening down into the juncture of one of the dog's shoulders. Steve stands there dumbly as Billy hollers. Laughs with it like he did that night at the Byers, but less hollow this time. More like when he broke Steve's keg stand record, spat a mouthful of beer into the air, and then cackled.

It shouldn't be kind of hot.

It's totally not.

When Billy yanks his axe-- a fucking axe-- from the dog's spine when he's done wailing on it, Steve starts moving. Hears when Robin and Nancy notice him, when they realize the dog that was nearing them

is suddenly gone.

“What the actual fuck,” Nancy says.

“Is that really the way to welcome someone back from the dead, Ice Princess?”

“Ice Princess?” she squawks.

She doesn’t have time to yell at him though, another demodog replacing the one she just took down. Steve lunges forward and slugs it. Sends it staggering into Billy’s path. He nails its head to the ground.

“Pretty good, Pretty Boy.”

“Well,” Steve breathes, ignoring the urge to preen, “You told me to plant my feet.”

“That I did.” Billy smiles at him, large and smarmy. Cocks his head up just a fraction, almost arrogant and takes him in.. If Steve didn’t know any better, he’d say he was peacocking, like he used to do in high school. Steve raises his brow at him. Not judging. Not dismissing. Not really sure what he’s trying to convey at all. Whatever it is, it causes a low laugh to ripple from Hargrove and Steve decides that he’s fine with it.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now,” Robin says. She stares at Steve, absolutely murderous. Billy laughs and swings his axe onto his left shoulder.

“Lets get you going, blondie. It’s this way. Harrington, take the right.”

“Does it matter?” Robin snaps, adrenaline quickly waning.

He shrugs, taking the axe off his shoulder to swig it in the open air. “I’m left handed.”

She scoffs and lets him drape her arm over his shoulder.

Nancy grabs Robin’s gun and swings it over her shoulder. Holds her

own in front of her at the ready. “Do you think there will be more?”

“Maybe. They travel in groups. If we’re fast, we should be able to get out before the whole pack realizes they’re gone.”

Steve takes up the right like he asked, holding his bat in his other hand. Steve grips Billy’s arm for support, his hand barely wrapping around his bicep. His skin is warm, slick with sweat and black blood, but still feels so alive under Steve’s palms. Billy’s hand goes to Steve’s shoulder, quickly moving away when Billy remembers the wound. His palm falls between his shoulder blades. Holding. Reassuring.

“Is your shoulder alright?”

“It’s fine,” Steve grits out. His voice is wrecked, painful and hoarse. Billy’s thumb rests against the end of his neck, rubs once, then twice against the collar of Steve’s jacket.

Billy curls his head forward, looking past Robin at Steve. Stares at him with a pinched brow before it smooths into a smile. This one is different though, more open. More like when Steve tried to shoo him off when he visited Scoops in his skimpy lifeguard uniform, which Steve deemed totally inappropriate for an ice cream shop. Billy had laughed then, mirth high in his eyes as he shook his head fondly. It didn’t help the blush that had risen in Steve’s cheeks the moment Billy walked through the door in his short red trunks and teensy Hawkins Lifeguard tank top. He left after Steve finally convinced him that he was holding up the line and wasn’t even ordering. Robin put three tallies under You Suck with a shake of her head and a roll of her eyes.

“Is this my jacket?”

Oh shit.

“Uhh--”

Billy laughs, soft and simple. “Suits you, Pretty Boy.”

Steve goes as red as Billy’s old red shorts.

They bump into El and the others at the next crossroads. Jonathan

runs to Nancy and sweeps her off her feet, holds her so close it looks crushing. Hopper pinches his brow when he sees Billy. Takes a deep breath and acts like they had annoyed him, like they had crashed his truck or something.

“Officer,” Billy croons, winking and tipping an invisible hat with his axe hand.

“I need a drink,” he says.

El doesn’t seem surprised at all. Just looks at him with a barely there smile. Like she knew he was coming. Knowing her, she probably did. They don’t say anything to each other, but he goes to her. Gives her the most gentle smile that Steve has ever seen. Ruffles her hair to ruin the moment. She beams at him then, shoving off his hand like they’ve been doing it for years.

With Billy and El there, it’s not much longer before they find the entrance. They get Robin out first and Dustin immediately tends to her leg, having been given the heads up once their two groups connected. They all surface and Steve feels like he can breathe again. He rips off his bandana and takes giant lungfuls of the clean air. As soon as he has his bearings, Nancy and Jonathan usher him over to the light of the car so they can examine his wounds.

Billy helps Hopper as they pour the last bit of gasoline into the tunnels’ entrance. Jonathan had been leaving a trail as they went; a very dangerous version of Ariadne’s golden thread. Hopper lets Billy do the honor, giving him a zippo to light it up. Billy flicks it open, staring into the flame for a moment. Steve watches him as it illuminates his face, the light licking away the shadows on his face. He sees the sadness in Billy then, the fear that wasn’t present when they had reunited. He wonders what he’s thinking of, what he all experienced in the tunnels.

He doesn’t want to know.

Billy tosses it into the hole and the whole thing goes up in flames. Steve shields his face from the heat and the bright, but Billy stares. Unwavering.

Steve stops Nancy's fussing, and walks up to Billy. He had to shed the jacket and his shirt to dress the wounds, so the fire below him feels nice. He puts his hands out to feel it, like it's the yearly bonfire at the quarry. It makes Billy chuckle, breaks him out of whatever headspace he was in.

"Sorry about the jacket," Steve says after a moment. "I'd give it back, but the dogs kind of destroyed it. Sorry."

"Nah," Billy says, looking up to Steve. Steve watches as the flames dance in the blue of his eyes. Knows Billy sees the same in his own. It's odd being this close to Hargrove. The last time he was able to count his freckles and his eyelashes, Steve's face was being bashed in. So he looks, sees the deep blue in his eyes that made the girls swoon, sees how dark his lashes are up close, looks at the beard that rivals Hoppers. He wonders if it's the soft or scratchy kind.

Billy's eyes flicker between Steve's for a moment, before they take in the rest of his face. Steve thinks that maybe he realized the same thing Steve did. Steve watches as his eyes flit lower before they shoot up to meet his gaze again.

Steve swears a pink rises underneath Billy's freckles and all the grime, but he can't be sure.

Billy smiles, breaking away to stare at the fire below. "Don't worry about it," he says, continuing. He turns to Steve again. Looks into his eyes, the little bit of height Steve has on him making him look through his lashes. "Consider it a gift."

Steve sucks in a breath at that. Doesn't know what to say.

He's saved by the screech of brakes and the slide of rubber on dirt. The car isn't even fully stopped before Max is throwing open the car door. She pauses for a moment, staring at Billy like she can't believe it. Like she's seen a ghost. But then she's a blur of red and barrels into Billy. Steve laughs and helps to steady them as she almost takes out her step-brother.

He holds her close and kisses the top of her head.

“You’re such an asshole,” she whispers into his chest.

“I know.”

“I am so upset with you.”

“I know.”

“Don’t you ever pull that shit again.”

“I’ll try not to.”

She pulls away from him and wipes at her eyes and then her nose. Her eyes are red and glassy. Billy’s seem the same. She looks at him like she doesn’t believe he’s real. And then punches his arm.

“Ow?”

“Alright, I’m better now.”

They all head to Steve’s house, still empty as always. Joyce sets up a makeshift infirmary on one end of the dining room table while Lucas, Max, and Dustin raid Steve’s kitchen to whip up some dinner. Steve wants to sleep so desperately, but knows that Joyce will kill him if he goes straight to bed. El, Nancy and Robin use the one guest bathroom, Jonathan and Hopper use the other.

Steve’s alone with Billy and suddenly, he doesn’t know what to do. It’s his own house, but yet he feels like a stranger. Doesn’t know where to go.

“I, uh. You can use my bathroom. It’s got a big tub if you don’t have the energy to shower. And then, I’ll-- uh. Show you where you can sleep.”

Steve takes Billy into his room and he’s self conscious about it, like when he first brought in Nancy. Like he wants to impress or something. Feels like he’s tiptoeing around. Doesn’t know how to behave around his nemesis. Former nemesis. Who also died. And then saved his goddamn life.

Yeah. Complicated.

Billy looks too small as he stands before Steve. His broad shoulders are pressed in and he's failing at trying not to look everywhere and take it all in. Steve watches him, watches him be nothing like the Keg King he once knew. He thinks about it, all of the bravado. He had always wondered if that was really how Billy was. Thought about what he was like underneath it all. Steve was a totally different person when he was King. It took heartbreak and a petal-faced demon to break him down to his core.

Perhaps this is who Billy was hiding all along.

Maybe Steve's just reading too into it. He's tired.

"You wanna go first?" Steve asks, "The extra towels are on the shelf above the toilet."

Billy nods and closes the door behind him. Steve wants to call to him, tell him that he's right outside of the door if he needs anything. Thinks about warning him about how sensitive the heat faucet is, but he doesn't. The man had been alone for about 9 months. Steve had no clue how he'd react to company, or even if he wanted any. And even if he did, he doubts he'd want Steve's company.

Steve lays out some sweats and a shirt that he hopes will fit Billy. Steve's skinny but not a stick, but he's nothing in comparison to Billy. He used to wear skin tight shirts in highschool, showing off the toned muscles he worked for, but now he's even bigger, months of survival honing his muscles.

Steve shakes his head. Doesn't want to think about what Billy experienced. Or his muscles. He slaps the butt of his palm to his forehead. Curses at Robin and all of her Soda Pop comments. He knows that he thinks Rob Lowe is hot. He also knows that in *St. Elmos Fire*, a movie he saw too many for casual interest, Rob Lowe looked an awful lot like--

The door clicks open and Billy steps out in the room. It startles Steve. Steam billows out behind him and he stops, staring at Steve like he didn't expect Steve to still be in the room, like he was waiting for him

or something.

Fuck, Steve curses to himself.

"I, uh. I have some clothing here for you I hope it fits--" he says, trailing off as he realizes that Billy Hargrove is in fact shirtless, towel wrapped around his hips. Steve's seen Billy in the locker rooms plenty of times. Has seen this exact view many times before. Hell, he's seen Billy naked. Knows what his bare ass looks like, even though he tried not to look.

But he's never seen his scars before.

He never even thought about them existing. Didn't even think of anything Billy related that was further than sad memories until a few hours ago.

The deepest one is in the center of his chest, a deep pink that swirls in the center of his chest like the hurricane depictions he remembers from some science class. It blooms across his sternum, like lightning bolts across his skin. It's all varying shades of fading pink, some easing into an almost silver color at the end. The center is the darkest though, just a tad darker than the shade of his lips. There are a couple starbursts on his side too. They're not as dark as the one in the center of his chest, right where he had pressed two fingers that one night at the Byers. Right where he had pushed to ignite the spark of Billy Hargrove.

Steve notices his hands then, how the marks blossom from his palms, licking up his forearm like the fire still raging in the tunnels.

Billy's posture is stiff, so far from the posturing that he always did before. He wore his chest proud, showing off his pecs and toned stomach, letting the world soak him in like he was their Californian sun. But now he shifts as he stands, like he can't bear the weight of Steve's gaze. He's glaring at Steve when he meets his eyes again. It's cold. Calculating. Challenging. Afraid. He's preparing for the punch, putting up guards so the blow won't hurt as bad.

Steve just wants to hug him. Wants to press his hand to his chest and feel the rough, scarred skin that holds in his beating heart and

remind him that he's alive. Relish in the fact that he's here.

Steve clears his throat and drops his eyes. It breaks the spell and Billy shoves past Steve and yanks on the shirt. It's definitely small on him, but it's enough. It's a cover.

Steve looks away when Billy drops his towel, but not before he manages to see the gnarly bite mark on the back of Billy's calf. Steve shuts his eyes, bleeding pain and sympathy.

"Do you need a longer shirt?" Steve asks. Doesn't mean to. Can't stop it from coming out.

"What?"

"I have a sweatshirt or something. I dunno if you wanna show your," he waves to Billy's chest. "I'm just--if you would prefer that, I can get it for you."

Billy looks at him, expression unreadable.

"Uh, yeah," Billy says. Rubs at his neck, pushing at his hair that is too long to be considered a mullet anymore.

Steve steps over to his closet and fetches one. Realizes it's his favorite as he's passing it to Billy. Laughs to himself in his head, how poetic it is. He'd let him keep it, if he wanted. An exchange for the jacket.

Billy holds it in his hands, no doubt looking at the hole at the collar and the two at the sleeves, where he'd worn his thumbs through.

"You don't have to--" Steve stops himself. Billy looks up to him, eyes wide and so un-Billy-like. So he continues. "You don't have to hide them. Unless you need to. Er-- want to."

Billy looks at him, brow furrowed. Looks at the sweatshirt in his hands.

Steve walks to the bathroom, telling his feet to move before he says something stupid. Something like--

"They're not ugly. If that's what you're worried about."

There it is. Idiot. Steve blames the exhaustion from his post-adrenaline haze. He pauses with his hand on the door, despite his brain screaming gogogogo.

“You couldn’t be-- You can’t be-- You’ve never--” Steve tries. Stops himself. “I’ll see you downstairs.”

The shower is heaven. Steve’s body hurts. Aches in a way that he hasn’t felt since the night that plate was smashed on his head. His forearm stings, but his shoulder burns. He washes it as gently as he can. Hisses as the dried blood makes room for fresh blood. He has to bite down on his knuckle to not shout out when he uses the soap, but it’s a close call. He should get out, get down to Joyce and let her take over, but the water feels so good. He watches the black blood, his blood, and dirt swirl in the drain, mixing with the suds from the soap and shampoo, until it turns clear. Only then does he step out.

The towel is quick to spot red, but Steve doesn’t care. He’ll throw it out. Burn it. Wants to do the same with his clothing. Decides to keep the coat, though. Wants to keep it like a trophy. Like it was a gift. He won’t be able to wear it out in Hawkins anymore, especially with Billy back and the weather warming, but he can settle.

He throws on pants with little difficulty, but the shirt is really where he has a problem. He decides to forgo, assuming Joyce will just have him take it off anyways. He takes one with him. He’ll have someone help him into it if he can’t do it later.

His feet feel like lead when he finally traipses downstairs. Everyone is around the dining table, filling the room that only gets used for his dad’s fancy work parties. It’s weird to see it now, how it’s a communal eat space and medical wing. When he enters the doorway, Dustin exclaims, happy to see him. Billy’s head shoots up from where he’s sitting, chatting with El and Max. He looks at Steve, then his bare chest, then quickly looks away. A blush rises high in his cheeks and Steve is sure of this one this time. Doesn’t even have time to think about it before Joyce pats the seat before her and he sinks into the chair.

Steve looks away, not wanting to look at the damage. Heard somewhere that looking at it only makes the pain worse. Finds his

sights falling on Billy, taking him in now that he's clean. His long hair is still golden, curling loose against his face and spilling over his shoulders. His beard is golden too; it's thickness rival's Hopper's. Steve ignores Joyce poking at his shoulder, distracted by how Billy talks with his hands and-- oh. He's not wearing the sweatshirt.

"I'm sorry I had to open it," Billy says to El, but she smiles at him.

"I know. I could feel it. It wasn't me, so I had a feeling."

"Thanks for guiding me." He ruffles her hair again, looking at her fondly. He turns to Max besides him. "Your creepy best friend would go into my dreams."

"No way," Max laughs.

"Yeah. It was cryptic as hell at the beginning, but then I realized she was helping me. Helped me find the gate."

Steve finds himself smiling to himself at the overheard conversation. Thanks El in his head and knows she can feel it. Besides him, Joyce sighs and places a bottle of something onto the table next to them.

"This might hurt," Joyce warns, but it's an understatement.

"FUCK," Steve growls in pain, breath seeping through gritted teeth. He hung his head and dug his nails into his palm. Joyce rubs circles into his back to soothe him.

"Sweetheart, I know it hurts, but you gotta have your head up for me to see it."

Steve tenses, raising his head. He stares at the ceiling, waiting for the next bit. It hurts just as bad, a blinding pain that has him banging his fist on the table. Thumppthump.

"Dustin," he gasps out when it becomes bearable again, "In my dad's office there's a mahogany cabinet. The key is in the top left desk drawer. Get me anything. Anything."

He scampers off and Steve counts to ten. Breathes in deep. Opens his eyes to find Billy looking at him across the way. It's not concerned,

nor malicious. Just. Watching. Head low.

Dustin shoves a bottle of amber liquid in front of his face and Steve doesn't even look at what it is. He points at all of the kids with the bottle in his hand. "If I find any of you taking from the cabinet, you will become best friends with my bat." The kids smile and roll their eyes as Steve looks at each of them. Finally rests on Billy again. Billy huffs and smirks at Steve. Steve points at him too, knowing that the old Billy is gone, the one that definitely would have robbed him blind of the good stuff, but it still feels right to do.

He takes a big swig of it. Feels it burn. Shakes his head at it.

"Where the fuck was that when my leg was getting fixed up," Robin interjects from the corner where she's propped up, her leg laying on a stack of pillows.

Steve smiles at her, takes another drink and reaches over to pass it to her.

"This is why you're my favorite," she says. Sighs happily as she drinks it, even though she winces at the burn. "Good shit."

"I'm gonna pretend I didn't see any of this and go package up the food," Hopper says and Joyce laughs at Steve's side. Robin passes the bottle back and Steve meets Billy's eyes again. Takes a sip again, keeping eye contact. Sees the twitch up of Billy's brow. He points the bottle towards Billy. An invitation. Billy looks to the bottle, then to Steve. It's charged, like the night they had first met. When Steve whipped off his sunglasses and tried to use the two extra inches of his height to his advantage, too consumed by the California sun before him to notice Nancy slip away and chug the punch.

It's a challenge.

Billy accepts.

"To surviving," he says, and takes a big gulp. Barely makes a face, besides the shifting of his jaw.

"To surviving," he echoes. Keeps his gaze level with Billy's. Smiles at him like this is a competition. Doesn't know what the prize is, but he

wants to keep playing.

He loses when Joyce starts on the stitches.

He's supposed to be sleeping. They're all supposed to be sleeping. They're all scattered throughout the house. Steve is used to it. They never want to be apart when something happens. It brings them all together, which is great, but it also brings out the worst in them all. Brings out the monsters.

Robin's asleep next to him, but he's not surprised. She sleeps like the dead. She still has nightmares, especially with the Russians, but somehow, she can fall asleep at the drop of a hat. He knows that his dad's goods also helped a lot.

Steve rubs his eyes. Looks at the clock reading 2:25am. He groans.

He slips out of his bed, slowly closing the door behind him to not disturb. He takes his bat through. He knows that El checked and said that the gate was fully closed, but he's on edge. He holds it at his side. Armed, but not ready.

He rounds the corner into the kitchen and his grip on his bat tightens, only for a moment.

“Oh, Hargrove. It’s you.”

Billy stands at the counter, snacking on cookies of all things. His hand is wrapped around the axe he has resting on the table. Steve laughs to himself.

“I see we’re both not sleeping tonight?”

“Yeah,” Billy breathes. “It’s too soft.”

“What?”

“The bed. It’s too soft. And quiet.”

Steve had let Billy stay in the master bedroom. Max didn’t want to

leave his side and El is glued to Max's side, even when Mike is around, so the two of them crawled into the king sized bed beside Billy and didn't leave.

"I haven't--" Billy continues. Steve watches him from the other side of the island, giving him the space he needs. Gives him the time and patience he needs. "I haven't slept in a bed since the Fourth of July. I kept feeling like I was falling. Or something."

Steve hums. Doesn't know how to answer it.

"Well, do you want to sleep anymore?"

Billy shakes his head.

"Do you want to be alone?"

Billy shakes his head harder.

"Alright then. We got a couple options. We could drink coffee and stay up--"

"Nah."

"Or watch a movie? I can make popcorn."

Billy thinks on it.

"Or I can grab the bourbon?"

Billy smiles at him. "What about option b and c?"

Steve smiles back at him. It's easy. The first time in a while that he can recall genuinely smiling. That he smiles just because he can, because he wants to. Because he's happy. Because he's content. "I can do that."

They end up on the couch, popcorn and bourbon between them, and Breakfast Club on the television. Steve's seen it so many times, especially with Robin. Can quote most scenes by now. He's almost at word for word. Billy's seen it once. Steve suggested watching something that was new, something that Billy missed. Told him about

his job at Family Video and how he always got a slew of movies on him to combat the insomnia. Billy laughs at the idea of it, that King Steve graduated from a dorky sailor costume to an awful green vest.

“At least I can wear what I want. Don’t have to wear that god awful sailor suit anymore. Or the hat.”

“Cmon. It wasn’t that bad.”

“That ba-- Billy. I know you saw me at least once. Just the hat by itself was horrible. Covered my best feature. Really damaged my pull game.”

Billy barks out a laugh. “What pull game?”

Steve shoves at him. Grabs the bottle and sips at it, enjoying it instead of greedily chasing a drunken state like earlier. He marvels at them though, the two of them, shoving each other like they’ve been friends for years. The last time Steve recalls touching Billy-- outside of gym class-- was when he gave him a shiner. He hums to himself. Reveling in it. Passes the bottle to Billy’s open hand.

“It wasn’t that bad. Your hair is definitely not your best feature.”

“Fuck off, that’s a lie. Everyone knows my hair is great.”

Billy chuckles, pink high on his cheeks. From laughter or booze, Steve doesn’t know.

“I didn’t say your hair was bad. I just don’t think it’s your best feature, Pretty Boy?”

“Alright, California,” he says and turns fully towards Billy, “What is my best feature then.”

Billy grabs at the bottle. Takes a bigger sip than he had been. He flushes. And Steve’s not an idiot. He may not be the sharpest, but he can read pretty well, unless his stupid chooses not to. Like with Nancy.

“Go on,” he goads and grabs the bottle. Matches Billy. “Tell me.”

Steve leans in, just a fraction. Could be excused as paying attention. But he's waiting, listening for a clue. Knows he's struck gold when Billy's eyes widen, just a bit, for a split second and his lips part ever so slightly. Steve goes slow, goes soft. Goes the route that gave him his title of King Steve. He knows how to be reassuring, to break down the barriers and get a read on people so he can appease them. Appeal to them. But with Billy, it's not a game. It hasn't been for a long time. But then he thinks back to the competitive fire that was swirling in Billy's eyes at the dining table and wonders if it is a game after all.

"I can go first. I'll tell you what your best feature is," Steve says, leaning back and putting his good arm behind his head. He's still facing Billy completely, the movie forgotten. Billy doesn't seem to mind that fact. Billy seems to shake his head to himself, like he doesn't believe it. Then he looks at Steve and grins. Slips back into the Billy that Steve is familiar with.

Two can play at that game.

Luckily for Steve, he knows this Billy. The Keg King, the Hawkins Moms' Wet Dream.

"It's the muscles, ain't it," he says. "Or my ass. The pool moms love my ass."

Steve barks out a laugh. "All of Hawkins knows you have a great ass. Just like how everyone knows I have good hair. It's a give-in, Hargrove. Try again."

Billy ponders, a small smile staying on his face. He searches Steve's eyes, scratching at his chin. He had shaved down the beard shortly after dinner, right after Max complained too many times about it. It's not clean shaved, but it's trimmed. Still enough to be a beard, but no longer looked "homeless", as Max so eloquently put it. His hair was also pulled up, put up in one of Robin's scrunchies. His ears stick out in a way Steve has never seen before. It's cute, Steve decides. Fitting for this new side of Billy Hargrove.

"Tell me," Billy decides, throwing a kernel of popcorn at Steve.

Steve makes a grabby hand at the bottle. Takes a drink. Lets the

silence stretch on and Billy leans in, anxiously waiting.

“I’d say your freckles,” Steve admits.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope,” Steve says, popping the “p”.

“Really?”

“Yeah. They’re like little spots of bottled up sunshine.”

“Huh,” Billy says and sits back, like he’s contemplating it, “Should’ve had you around when I was in grade school. Dumb kids said it looked like a marker exploded on my face.”

“That’s rude,” Steve says, but he’s laughing. “Tell me their names. I’ll go whoop their asses right now.”

“My hero,” Billy says, deadpan. Puts a hand over his heart and pretends to swoon.

“Hell, you saved my ass. I’d only be returning the favor.”

Steve pokes at the popcorn. Sticks a piece in his mouth and lets it disintegrate on his tongue.

“Thanks for that, by the way.”

“You don’t need to thank me.”

“You didn’t have to save us though, Billy.”

“Yeah,” he says, tone firmer than the playful banter they had going. He looks into Steve’s eyes. Makes sure Steve realizes he’s serious. “I did.”

“First Starcourt and now this? I’m going to have to owe you.”

Steve tries to go for a joke, but of course he puts his foot in his mouth. Billy’s face falls. He breaks away from Steve’s gaze and the beautiful smile that had been lighting up his eyes fades instantly. Like a light switch.

“I did a lot of bad things, Steve,” Billy says. He doesn’t look at Steve. Picks at a thread Steve’s sweatshirt. “I had time to come to terms with them, I guess. I didn’t want to at first. I didn’t want to accept that it wasn’t all my fault. The Mindflayer-- or whatever you guys call it-- it used my body and my voice. It made me witness horrific things. Things that I will never forget. But I didn’t do it.

“I guess I’m just trying to make things even. Do some good.”

Steve misses the stability that he had, that they had. Liked how they were laughing and smiling together. Liked that he is able to talk to someone and not feel like they were worried he was going to break. Or that they were going to break. He craves it again. Addicted.

So he pelts Billy in the forehead with a kernel.

“I’m gonna say one more thing and then we’re dropping this because we’ve had enough sad shit for today,” Billy nods. “You’re a good person. Were you an ass? Yeah. A royal pain in my side, really. But I was too, at some point. Before you came around. People change. And they forgive.”

Billy hums at that.

“And as for me, I forgave you for November a while ago. I never wanted to and never will hold it against you.”

Billy smiles at that. Smiles at him. Makes Steve feel like he’s basking in the California sun.

“You’re a good person,” Billy says. It’s earnest and he’s so open. It makes Steve’s hands clammy. He averts his eyes.

“I’m alright--”

“No,” Billy interjects, “It’s the feature. Your best feature. You care about everyone. To a fault, almost. But you do.”

Steve huffs to himself. “I think you’re right with that one.”

“Also you got bambi eyes.”

“Oh, come on,” Steve groans and Billy laughs. “Not you too.”

“What?”

“Robin always says I have bambi eyes. That like they’re big and brown and make people swoon. And that I can get away with shit because of them.”

“She got a point, Bambi.”

Steve groans, letting his head fall back to the armrest. Keeps it there for a moment for the dramatics before raising it back up to meet Billy’s smirk with one of his own. But he goes too fast and yanks at the skin at his shoulder. Winces and whines.

“Oh shit, is it okay?” Billy asks, scooting forward to see.

“I think it’s fine?” Steve pulls the sleeve of his shirt down so the collar shows the juncture of his neck. “Does it look okay?”

Billy reaches in, putting the bottle and the popcorn on the coffee table. He moves Steve’s face to the side with a gentle press and looks it all over. Steve’s breath falters and his heart jackhammers until it breaks through his ribcage and plummets into his stomach.

He hears Billy swallow, he’s that close. Feels when his touch lifts. Can almost feel the rumble of his throat when he says softly, “It looks alright.”

Billy settles back down, slow as if not to spook. Steve doesn’t know if he’s trying not to scare himself or Steve. He stays close, though. Remains only a breath away from Steve. He can smell the bourbon and the popcorn on his breath. Billy’s hand remains in front of him, just hovering in front of Steve’s shoulder, like he’s yearning to touch.

Steve takes him in, notes the slight furrow in his brow, how his eyes are so bright and blue, flitting around Steve’s face like he’s doing the same exact thing. Watching. Waiting. Steve looks for familiar constellations across Billy’s cheeks, ones that he recalls Dustin and Lucas discussing. His breathing slows, falling in tandem with Billy’s and Billy’s dark lashes flutter, shadowing over his cheekbones.

Steve can feel each breath of air from his lips, looks down and watches as he wets them, parts them just so. Steve's eyes snap back up to Billy's and he searches the depths of the blue he finds there. Finds fear, loneliness, and trepidation, but also finds hope.

Steve lifts his hand slowly, lets it rest at the juncture of Billy's jaw. His eyes roam over Billy's face, looking for any clue, any tic that tells him to stop. But Billy leans into the touch ever so slightly, his eyes darting down to Steve's mouth.

"Pretty boy," he breathes, sounding almost pained, "Please."

And Steve's restraint snaps.

He pushes forward, pressing ever so softly, allowing Billy to part from him, to pull away. But Billy sighs into him, reaching up to cradle Steve's cheek with one hand and sink the other one into his hair. He lets out a noise at the back of his throat and pushes back into a proper kiss.

The scratch of a beard takes a moment for Steve to adjust to. It always does. It's not his first kiss with a boy, but goddamn if it hasn't ruined every other one for Steve. Billy's lips are soft against his and with just a touch of Steve's tongue, he opens up to him with a sigh. He can taste the movie theater butter and the bourbon lingering on his tongue, but there's something heady there too, something that is only Billy.

Steve had thought about this many times, late at night, in the shower, in his dreams. He always thought it would be harsh and hot, like they were starving and only had a limited amount of time. He supposes that's how it was back then. He always wondered what would have happened if Nancy wasn't around that first night, if he knew what he knew about himself now. If he would have noticed the posturing, if he would have dared to bite back. Would they have found each other in a bathroom or a closet, frantically trying to touch as much skin as they could bear before getting each other off and then leaving and pretending it didn't happen?

He didn't care anymore. Billy was leaning into him, smiling against his lips like he had found euphoria and Steve couldn't help but agree.

Billy Hargrove was alive and crawling into Steve's lap like he was destined to be there, to press Steve into the pillow behind him and move down to pepper kisses along his jaw. Steve can't help but let out a gasp when Billy sucks on his pulse, enough to get him to react, but not enough to leave a mark.

Even though the idea of having a reminder of right now, that Steve will be able to wake up and see that it happened, it's a small town. People talk. They know better.

Steve directs Billy back, kissing him deep like he never will again, like he'll wake up tomorrow and it will all be a dream and Billy will just be a name that lives on, engraved on a tombstone. He lays kisses on Billy's neck, against his jaw, across his collarbone, and stops to bite at his earlobe. Billy groans deep in his throat. Makes Steve chuckle into his shoulder.

"Shut up, you're hot."

Steve kisses the pout off of Billy's lips, sinks his hands into Billy's curls and holds him tight. Catalogues all the little noises he gets out of him. He presses forward as he tries to memorize the taste of him and tries to press Billy back into the pillows against the arm of the couch, to feel the warmth of his body below him and ignite the warmth building inside of him, but only makes it so far before he pulls back, hissing through his teeth as he pulls back his shoulder.

Billy, the beautiful boy laying below him, looking like an absolute vision, just chuckles. Smiles at him with dark eyes. Leans up onto his elbows and kisses Steve briefly.

"We should probably wait until you're healed, Bambi."

Steve frowns and sighs. Plops back against the back of the couch, facing the television again. The movie is almost over; Bender is going to punch the air in a couple minutes.

Billy curls into Steve's side, lavishing kisses at his neck like he wasn't the one who suggested to stop. But who is Steve to stop him? He lets his head fall back, letting Billy have free reign as he lets out a shuttered breath.

“Are you gonna give me your earring?” Billy purrs into his ear.

Steve cracks open an eye and takes in the devilish grin that he hated so much, the one that he’s growing to adore.

“You think you’re Bender?”

“Well yeah,” he says, continuing to kiss Steve’s jaw, slowing as he goes. “Hot headed, shitty dad, great hair--”

“Kind of a dick.”

Billy laughs and Steve kisses it out of his mouth.

They fall asleep on the couch eventually, laid out and curled into each other for warmth. They wake when the first person enters the kitchen, shooting apart and looking into the doorway to see who it is.

“Relax, it’s just me,” Robin whines, holding her head. “Why did you let me drink bourbon?”

She sees it then, the bottle on the coffee table.

“Jesus, get that out of my sight before I get sick. As if this--” she motions to where they’re still partially wrapped around each other, “won’t cause it first.”

Billy stills and Steve panics.

“Robin’s gay,” Steve tells him, only to reassure, but he laughs.

“Yeah, I learned that a long time ago.”

“Yeah, dingus,” Robin laughs, “We had chemistry together and had suspicions. We actually bonded over hating you, actually.”

“What?” Steve squeaks.

“Steve, I already told you. I was jealous. Billy boy here was just projecting because he couldn’t have you.”

“Really?”

Billy shrugs, “I wanted to fuck you since that Halloween night.”

“And this is my cue!,” Robin exclaims, walking out. “Glad you guys happened. While I was ready to play matchmaker, I’m so glad I don’t have to deal with the moping.”

“Moping?” Steve whispers to Billy as Robin leaves. Billy just rolls his eyes at it.

“So, Halloween?” Steve asks, brow raised high.

“Yeah,” Billy says, smiling at him all wicked. “You were hot. What can I say? Took dying to act on it though. ‘S no reason to hide anymore, to be honest.”

“Well let’s be glad you’re alive then,” Steve hums, leaning in to kiss Billy again.

Two weeks later, Steve has to resist pulling Billy in by the lapels and kissing the shit out of him.

Max was able to salvage some things of Billy’s, but everything was mainly sentimental; Neil donated everything else. So here they were, at the fancy department store, trying to blow Billy’s hefty amount of the government’s hush money on a new wardrobe. Steve had behaved through all of the shirts, finding nicer button downs that Billy could undo if he wanted, to let the world see his scars. Steve barely restrained himself while they were looking at pants, wanting to sneak into the dressing room with Billy and just watch. Instead, he had to resort to just letting himself mentally take the pants off whenever Billy showed him a pair.

“C’mon, guys. We’re literally in public,” Max had whined. But Steve didn’t care. Gave Billy a look that told him exactly what he was thinking. Thought about having Billy do his own private fashion show just for Steve. Maybe let it be an interactive experience and let Steve peel him out of each outfit.

This part was probably the hardest. Here he was, watching his--whatever try on jacket replacements. Steve didn’t know what they

were. They hadn't discussed it. Didn't know if they were boyfriends now. Or lovers. But he was Billy's and Billy was his. And that was the second thought on his mind, the first being how good Billy looks in a leather jacket.

With the sight of a gleeful Billy before him and the smell of leather, Steve couldn't help but have some sort of pavlovian response. Steve was about ready to buy the entire store if it meant he could get home with Billy any faster.

"Bambi?" Billy asks, bringing him back, "I think this is the one."

It was so similar to his old one. The straight cut, the cotton collars. Even the pockets were in the same place, the color the same dark brown.

Steve walks over to run his hand over the leather. Meets Billy's eyes in the mirror. "Perfect."

Billy chuckles, grinning at Steve's reflection like he always does. The way that ignites Steve in just the right way. He sheds the coat and plops it onto Steve's shoulders. Steve can't help but settle into it. He looks into the mirror, checking out how it looks. Billy beams at him, checking around them before grabbing Steve's arms and hooks his chin over his shoulder.

"Looks like you can steal this one too."

Author's Note:

i do not know how to write romance so i hope this was alright LMAO i just had to get it out of my worm brain. also had no clue what to name this so. yup.

also this is for niamh and clo, who i adore sm. Thanks for always listening to my shit posting love u <3